



Are IB students preferred over A level students for entrance to the world's top universities?

Both International A levels and the IB Diploma (DP) qualification are widely respected routes into higher education and recognised by universities worldwide. However, it is often claimed by IB schools that IB DP students are preferred over their A level counterparts for entrance to the world's top universities because they are better prepared and the IB DP is valued more highly by university admissions teams.

In reality, IB Diploma and International A level students are similarly well prepared for the transition to university as both programmes provide them with the skills they need to thrive in higher education – for more on this see our separate factsheet *Are IB students better prepared for the transition to university than A level students?*

And in terms of university recognition, more than 750 universities worldwide accept Pearson Edexcel International A levels (IAL[®]), compared to just over 500 universities that recognise the IB.¹

But do those university admissions teams who recognise it, actually favour the IB curriculum?

Where do headlines like this come from?

An IB Research report from 2018² references a study that 'surveyed the perceptions of UK university admissions officers of A level and DP students' preparation for university'. The 2017 study³ referred to in this report is by ACS International Schools who run three IB and US curriculum schools in Greater London and one in Qatar. The study is no longer available online, however the IB report repeats the study's conclusion that 'overall, the DP was considered the best educational qualification for providing students with the necessary skills to succeed at university' and, according to ACS, 'university admissions officers believed the DP was particularly helpful in "nurturing an open mind"'.⁴

Around 80 UK university admissions officers were surveyed but as the original study is no longer accessible, it is unclear whether it was comparing the IB Diploma with UK (GCE) A levels or International A levels.

It is useful to compare the two international curricula – the IB Diploma and International A levels – to better understand how each provides opportunities for students to develop the skills that will help them thrive in higher education and beyond. Again, for more on this, see our separate factsheet *Are IB students better prepared for the transition to university than A level students?*

How do the two international curricula compare on recognition?

In terms of recognition, rather than being preferred as a university entrance qualification, according to BridgeU, a leading provider of university and careers guidance to international schools in over 140 countries, many international school counsellors report a significant downside to the IB DP is the need to navigate the international entry requirements for the qualification around the world.⁴

This is because, although most universities recognise the IB DP, the level of recognition varies country by country. Some countries recognise the IB curriculum at national level, so all universities in that country will accept the Diploma as a valid entry qualification; in other countries, recognition will be at individual university or local governing body level. And in some cases, IB students will need to fulfil additional requirements such as language tests to gain entry on to their chosen degree courses.

In contrast, Pearson Edexcel International A levels are more widely recognised and valued more consistently both globally and at individual country-level for university admissions.⁵

How do they compare on university entry tariffs?

All universities in the UK, Europe and the US set their own entry requirements and because there is no agreed scale for mapping standards across curricula – so for example, how IB points might map to International A level grades – most universities will set their own equivalents, which can lead to significantly different interpretations of how applicants with IB, A level, US or local curriculum qualifications, compare.

The BridgeU report *'Decoding the black box of UK university admissions for UK schools'*⁶ explains that this means that in the UK for example, 'the same UCAS points can equate to a range of IB requirements that span from below 27 IB points to over 36 in different universities.'

The picture is further complicated by the fact that for entrance to university in Europe and the UK, IB students typically need the full IB Diploma,⁷ which means passing all six subjects⁸ as well as the compulsory TOK, CAS and extended essay components and meeting the 24-point threshold for the qualification to be awarded.

In comparison, International A level students require three A levels⁹ for entrance to university in Europe and the UK. The highest practical offer to be made by either Oxford, Cambridge or Imperial College London – three of the most prestigious universities in the UK – is A*A*A* at International A level. However, the same universities require 40 points in the IB Diploma, which means IB DP students need to score 7s or above in all six IB DP subjects.

Similarly, university courses that require specific subjects at A level or equivalent will typically require IB students to take these subjects at higher level as part of their Diploma programme which means that IB DP students will likely only have three subjects to count towards degree-level subject-specific entry requirements (like their International A level counterparts). Again, the higher IB points requirement for such courses means IB DP students will typically need to score highly in their three standard level subjects as well as their higher level subjects to meet the entry requirements.

Of course, individual university courses have different entry requirements and, in some instances, the IB DP requirements for entry on to STEM subject degrees at some UK universities can be lower than the International A level requirements. However, the opposite is the case for those students wanting to study humanities, languages and arts subjects, where higher IB scores are required compared to International A level requirements.

In short, there is considerable variance in how universities worldwide ascribe entry points values to the IB DP and International A level qualifications.

The reality is that most universities look at a far wider picture than an international student's qualifications alone and as Robin Hull, former principal and now chairman of Hull's School, a leading international school in Zurich says in his advice to parents:

"In reality, universities know that each pre-university programme has its strengths and weaknesses and is unbiased toward any particular qualification."

The verdict? Think again!

Both the IB DP and Pearson Edexcel International A level qualifications are widely respected routes into universities worldwide. However, there is no agreed scale for mapping standards across curricula and all universities in the UK, Europe and the US set their own entry requirements, so no like-for-like comparison can be made. This means that at individual university level, IB students may enjoy lower entry tariffs for one course yet see higher tariffs for entry onto a different course at the same university.

A more balanced headline would be:

"IB DP students enjoy similar recognition for their qualifications to International A level students applying to universities worldwide, however individual universities may interpret the value of each qualification differently depending on the applicant's course choice and rarely consider qualifications as the only measure of a student's suitability."

References

- 1 [Find countries and universities that recognize the IB](#), IB Organisation, August 2023.
- 2 [Key findings from research on the impact of IB programmes in the Africa, Europe, Middle East \(AEM\) region](#), IB Research 2018.
- 3 ACS International Schools 2017 study 'Thriving at University: University Admissions Officers Report 2017 ([unretrievable online](#) August 2023).
- 4 [BridgeU](#) How to understand universities' IB requirements.
- 5 In Germany, three UK or international A levels are required for admission to German universities, replacing the previous requirement of three A level and one AS (or equivalent), and mathematics is no longer mandatory for learners applying to degrees within the arts, humanities and law. [Pearson Edexcel International A levels are recognised for admission to all German universities](#) and evaluated according to the same basic and subject-specific rules as UK A levels. In Spain, where around 65,000 students currently study British qualifications, a 2023 bilateral agreement enables students with UK qualifications (including A levels and equivalent) to access universities in Spain without the requirement of additional entrance exams. As the British Council explains, 'Although the profile of these students is very international, families were concerned that students could no longer access Spanish universities. As a result, many of these schools were moving towards the IB. This agreement has brought much needed clarity for schools and families, and British Schools in Spain will [also] continue to be an important source of students for UK universities as they have been up to now.' [UK - Spain mutual recognition of school qualifications](#), British Council.
- 6 [Decoding the black box of UK university admissions for IB schools report](#), BridgeU.
- 7 European universities require IB students to have passed the full IB Diploma. Some UK and US universities are flexible over which elements IB students must have passed.
- 8 IB DP students study six subjects from six subject groups – Studies in language and literature, Language acquisition, Individuals and societies, Science, Mathematics and the Arts. They will take three, or occasionally four, subjects at higher level and will take the other three, or two, at standard level. Each International A level comprises a total of 360 teaching hours. [The IB Diploma Programme curriculum](#), IB Organisation.
- 9 Students following a British international curriculum will study between five and ten subjects at International GCSE and then typically progress to study three or four subjects at International A level, from a choice of over 20 subjects including English Language/Literature, Languages, Sciences, Maths, Humanities and Arts subjects. [Pearson Edexcel International A levels \(IAL[®]\)](#) comprise 180 teaching hours at IAS level plus 180 teaching hours at IA2 level. These two levels make up the full International A level, totalling 360 teaching hours.

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Further reading

Read more in our series of myth busting factsheets:

Is the IB DP programme more academically rigorous than A levels?

Is the IB the only curriculum where students foster an international mindset?

Are IB students better prepared for the transition to university than A level students?

Does the IB DP programme give students more choice over degree subjects than A level students?

Are IB DP students more likely than similar A level students to enrol in a top 20 UK higher education institution?

Are IB students more likely to be admitted into the United States' most prestigious universities?

Are British qualifications only useful if you want to study at a British university?

Are you only a real international school if you offer an IB curriculum?

